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AUTHOR Jowett, Garth S.
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ABSTRACT

The mass media in the United States have played a major role in the emergence of a mass society resulting from the interaction of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization and have thus become an integral part of the total social fabric. Society's culture and social structure shape its system of mass communication so that the development, from the 1830s to the present, of urbanization has brought about an allied development in mass communications. First, the need for urban communication forms was met by the urban press. Then, as urban life became increasingly complex, the telegraph, telephone, and motion picture were developed, followed in the twentieth century by radio and television. As essentially products of an urban society, the contents of the mass media are concerned mainly with urban life and reflect urban values. (JM)

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THE MASS MEDIA AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT:

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

BY

GARTH S. JOWETT

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THE MASS MEDIA AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT:

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

by Garth S. Jowett
Department of Communication Studies
University of Windsor

The growth in importance of the mass media of communications is a phenomenon unique to modern society, and is the product of the social and cultural conditions created by urbanization, industrialization and modernization. As a result of the interaction of these processes of social change, we now have a society which is not only highly dependent upon mass communication, but the media have also become an integral part of our total social fabric.

Unfortunately, few historians have examined or attempted to understand the importance of the mass media as a shaper of American life, and the few available histories of the various media are seldom conceived within the framework of any specific model of social change. Thus the role of the mass media and their major contribution to the emergence of a "mass society" in the United States has not received the systematic historical analysis its importance warrants.

THE CHANGING FACE OF AMERICA

Between 1890 and 1930, the spatial organization of American society was dramatically transformed. This transformation was

the result of three developments of the late nineteenth century. First, the increasing population growth in urban areas; second, the location of large-scale industrial complexes in close proximity to these growing urban centres; and third, the invention and adoption of revolutionary new communications media such as the telegraph and telephone. These three developments, inextricably linked and constantly acting as impetuses to each other, created a new social and economic order with dramatically enlarged spatial boundaries. Stretching out from the industrial cities of the Northeast, important communications and transportation links restructured all previous concepts of time and distance, and encouraged the development of economic control of industry from centralized locations mainly in the Northeast.[1]

The "old" America with a predominantly rural-based population was transformed into a nation whose population lived mainly in cities, and while the more traditional rural culture would continue to play an important vestigial role in American life, eventually it too was forced to yield some of its hold under pressure from the more widely disseminated urban culture inherent in the new communications media. This battle was not won easily, and the strength of rural America as a symbol of "good and virtue" persists, and has become a part of the accommodation process toward urbanization.[2] Historians have generally seen this change from a rural to an urban culture with new values and ideals as a major aspect of the modernization of the United States, and the source of much of the social and cultural tensions evidenced in the early years of the twentieth century.[3]

TABLE 1

POPULATION IN URBAN AND RURAL TERRITORY, 1870-1950[a]

POPULATION IN MILLIONS

YEAR	RURAL (Under 2,500)	URBAN (Above 2,500)	% URBAN
1870	28.7	9.9	25.5
1890	40.8	22.1	35.1
1910	50.0	42.0	45.6
1920	51.6	54.2	51.4
1930	53.8	69.0	56.4
1940	57.2	74.4	56.5
1950	54.2	96.5	64.0

[a]Historical Statistics of the United States (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1961), Series A 195-209, p. 14.

The migration of people into urban areas had long been a feature of American life, but this movement reached its zenith in the two decades between 1890 and 1910, when internal movement from American farms combined with massive immigration from Europe to increase the urban population by nearly twenty million.[4] The interaction of the newcomers with those already established in the urban centers created a volatile mixture which made the American city an exciting, if not terrifying place to some.

The importance of industrial development in encouraging the growth of urban centers in the period after the Civil War cannot be overlooked. Whereas American cities had long been major centers of commerce, the transformation from the commercial to the industrial city was a feature of post-Civil War urban development.[5] The improvement made in transportation, especially railroads opened up vast new fields of raw materials to these growing

industries. In the decade of the eighties, over 71,000 miles of new railway lines were built, and the entire Northeast was laced with a dense and complex network of railroad systems.[6] Not only did the railroads make new markets accessible for industry by bringing together the various geographic and economic sectors of the country into much closer contact than ever before, but they also helped considerably in the extension of the concept of a "national American community."

It was, however, the development of new forms of communications media which did the most to bring about this national community. This fact is made clearer if we accept sociologist Francis E. Merrill's definition of community as a "permanent group of persons, occupying a common area, interacting in both institutional and non-institutional roles, and having a sense of identification with the entity (the community) that arises from this interaction."[7] While this definition of community is synonymous with society, it does stress the importance of social interaction as the basis for the development of national interests and emotional bonds which can create a spatially extended common culture. The ability of the communications media to bring about the creation of a national identity is well documented, and it has been noted that "the structure of social communication reflects the structure and development of society."[8] It is communication which can overcome the development of a vast number of unique cultural identities caused by wide geographic separation —a danger which was all too real in the United States.

The development of new communications media such as the

cheap, daily newspaper in the 1830's; the telegraph in 1844; the telephone in 1876; commercial, projected motion pictures in 1896; and commercial radio in the 1920's, were all part of this total communications revolution that would so radically transform many aspects of American life. No longer was the individual confined to local interaction; his environmental horizons were greatly expanded, as was his sphere of political interests. The stage was now set for the development of a new national consciousness among the American people.

While even today, after much examination, the degree and direction of association between the development of new media forms and the nature of social change are not completely clear, certain definite links can be indicated in the case of the United States. That important social document, the President's Report on Recent Social Trends, published in 1933, examined in detail the changes brought about by innovations in the fields of communication and transportation and synthesized the major effects into four areas:

1. The problems of coordination and competition which "because of their public aspects . . . have involved to an unusual degree, planning, regulation and control."

2. The problems of mobility: "The transmission of goods, of the voice and possibly of vision may act as a retarding influence on human mobility in the future and may cause a development of more remote and impersonal directions and controls."

3. The centralization of human life caused by "the effectual shortening of distances and the increasing size of the land area which forms the basis or unit of operation for many organized activities."

4. The problems arising from the greater ease and diffusion of the media: "Regional isolation is being broken down

> all over the world. . . . The agencies of mass communication increase and possibilities of education, propaganda and the spread of information. . . . The developments bring problems of mass action, of mass production and standardization."[9]

The men drafting this report further noted that these new forms of communication, and especially the mass media and their cultural manifestations of mass entertainment, had helped to bring about what Henry Commager has called "a greater uniformity of character and habit than had been common in the nineteenth century."[10] Even then the final results were not clear and the report noted that: "The surface picture is one of chaos and conflict . . . however certain tendencies appear. There has developed a partially integrated system whereby contacts are established between individuals with a maximum of ease over an area of ever-increasing radius."[11] America was growing smaller as the system of social interaction grew larger!

There is no doubt that the series of changes brought about by the formidable combination of urbanism, industrialism and the communications revolution generated a myriad of tensions in turn-of-the-century America. Various historians have attempted to analyze the effects of these tensions, and different labels have been created to explain society's reactions such as: "the status revolution"; "the search for order"; "the response to industrialism"; or even "the end of innocence." Whatever the most apt description might be, each of these three forces for change generated a similar set of problems and responses.

First, each indicated new possibilities for the centralization of power and control; this in turn presented a very real threat to

the existing sources of power and authority and resulted in the inevitable struggle for ultimate social control. Thus the city eventually superseded the rural areas in political and economic control; large corporations, such as the monopolistic Trusts, gained an ever-increasing share of the American economy to the detriment of small business, while the new forms of communication became an integral and indispensable part of the social and cultural infrastructure, capable of wielding immense power with their unrivalled ability to disseminate symbols and messages to large segments of the American population within a very short time period.

Second, the deep and rapid changes that resulted from this three-pronged attack on traditional society left in its wake a dazed population which was uncertain about which social and cultural norms they were to follow. In societies undergoing such rapid change new norms are constantly created and old ones abandoned. The established patterns of organized relationships constituting the family, church, school and government were all subjected to severe stress that could only be stabilized by a major social and cultural re-orientation which could accommodate the new order. The internalization of these new norms, together with their social significance, was not easily achieved by large segments of the population.

The third reaction to these changes was the direct result of their combined assault on the existing social order. So vast and far-reaching were the transformations that they set in motion, that ultimately they were considered by many to be the cause of

all the harmful, anti-social influences that threatened to destroy the basis of traditional American society. Thus for a great many Americans the city had always been symbolic of all that was evil. The sociologist, Anselm Strauss, has noted that this attitude had two related, but different, aspects: "The city destroyed people who were born or migrated there. The city also imperiled the nation itself. Especially after the Civil War . . . and . . . the cities were replete with crime, vice, immorality, and poverty - the city served to threaten its own citizens, those still living in the countryside, and the very fabric of the nation itself."[12] In 1885, the Reverend Josiah Strong in his attack on the changes in American society noted that, "the city has become a serious menace to our civilization, because in it . . . each of the dangers we have discussed is enhanced, and all are focalized."[13]

In much the same way the technological and economic changes brought about by development of large-scale industry caused the American people to revise their basic ideas concerning the nature of their society, themselves, and their role in the world. But here too, there were deep suspicions of end results of industrialization which were all too easily reinforced by the sights of smoke-filled skies, long, dark rows of worker's homes, dreadful living conditions and filthy city streets, and the conspicuous inequality in the distribution of wealth. The machine had long created conflicts in the American psyche, but these tensions reached a peak at the turn of the century when mechanization threatened to bring about the total depersonalization of the

individual and thus destroy a basic tenet of faith in everything the New World had stood for.[14] It took the combined efforts of religious and social groups, with the assistance of stringent legislative action to ensure that the final products of industrialization were to be used to enhance the development of a new society for all segments of the population.

However, it is in assessing the reactions and prevailing attitudes toward the new communications media that we find the greatest paradox. Certainly initial reactions were mixed, and much depended on the immediate social and economic utility of the particular form of communication. The telegraph and the telephone were of obvious benefit to society, and to industry in particular, and thus were the objects of praise and promise. On the other hand, the forms of communication which we now call mass communication, that is, newspapers, motion pictures, radio and ultimately television, have all been both praised and damned as being either "cornerstones of democracy" or "agents of the devil." Of these three agents of change, the mass media have been the most unsuccessful in fully integrating themselves into the structure of American society, and their acceptance or rejection at any one time has depended upon a wide variety of criteria relating to their social utility, content and cost. There have also been wide regional variations in their pattern of acceptance or rejection which must be considered.

It is clear that the accommodation process to certain forms of communications media was not as successful as in the case of urbanization or industrialization.[15] The question remains, why?

We can only suggest a few possible answers. First, while all three agents of change experienced similar problems, the communications revolution was in fact quite different from the other two in that its end product was more abstract, less substantive, and yet ultimately influenced a larger number of people over a longer period of time. (In fact its influence has not yet reached a peak, and the so-called "information explosion" is only now making itself felt on the population as a whole.) Second, while the communications media gained much faster initial acceptance than either industrialization or urbanization, in the long run, because of their inherent characteristics and capabilities they have experienced much more difficulty in finding their proper social or cultural niche. The real or imagined fears associated with the media's ability to induce attitude changes or to convey certain anti-social modes of behaviour, together with their capability of transcending local and traditional influences has made complete acceptance difficult.

THE NEW "MASS" MEDIA

Starting with the first large circulation daily newspapers in the 1830's, followed by the motion picture in 1896, and radio and then television in the twentieth century, the mass media have had a profound influence on American life, and created a vast new audience eager to consume whatever content they had to offer. The nature and characteristics of these new media and their emerging audiences created a form of social interaction which was entirely new.[16]

Thus these new media were directed primarily toward large audiences which were essentially heterogeneous in composition. This meant that members of the audience had to share a common interest in the content of the media and a common set of cultural understandings and values. The communicative act now took place over great distances, and the relationship between the audience and the communicator was relatively impersonal. Also, the flow of communication was basically in one direction, from the source to the audience. (The establishment of a two-way interaction or "feedback" was one of the major aims of groups interested in social control of the media, while its absence proved to be an important barrier to total acceptance.) Finally, as Denis McQuail notes, "the audience for these new media was a collectivity unique to modern society." They were basically an aggregate of individuals "united by a common focus of interest, engaging in an identical form of behaviour, and open to activation towards common ends; yet the individuals involved are unknown to each other, have only a restricted amount of interaction, do not orient their actions to each other and are only loosely organized or lacking in organization."[17]

These characteristics and their implications created social conditions which were so totally new that their existence brought about fundamental changes in the structure and interaction within American society. The new communications media gave rise to totally new complexes of activity concerned with the manipulation of symbols and personalities, and in the process the mass media inevitably acquired their own status and authority, and were

placed in the position of being able to confer prestige and legitimacy on those issues or personalities to which they turned their attention.

Almost from the first, the mass media were dominated by the idea of providing entertainment for their large audiences. (This presumes that news has an intrinsic entertainment value.) This emphasis can be attributed to a combination of circumstances: First, the media needed to secure relatively large audiences to provide a strong economic base, and this could only be obtained by providing what a significant segment of the population seemed to want. Second, the rapid transformation of social and cultural conditions, especially urbanization, had created large potential audiences who were searching for inexpensive entertainment as a form of recreational activity. Third, the communications media proved to be ideally suited for carrying entertainment previously available only in the larger centers into the smaller cities and towns. Fourth, in the case of the motion picture and television, both of these innovations were originally conceived and introduced as an extension of an extant entertainment industry.[18] Finally, although some forms of the mass media were widely used for purposes other than public entertainment such as military use of radio, or government use of motion pictures, such utilitarian uses failed to catch the public's imagination in quite the same manner as did their more "glamorous" entertainment content. It was mainly in this entertainment role that the mass media were able to permeate all segments of society, and to become an important source for establishing trends in such areas as leisure,

personal consumption and even courting behaviour.

A major aspect of the introduction of the mass media was their ability to by-pass the existing channels of social communication and authority structures in the spheres of politics, religion, education, kinship and economics, and to establish direct contact with the individual.[19] Particularly in the areas of education and religion, parents and teachers became concerned because they felt powerless to prevent the influence of these new communications forms, which seemed to be so readily accessible to the young. Thus many of the mass media's inroads into existing institutions were initially resisted, but eventually there was a gradual move toward greater accommodation, and finally each of the affected institutions came to use these media for its own purposes.

The sudden awareness of the potential of these new communications forces in American life caused a great deal of concern about the normal methods of social control, since the mass media seemed to be a much more powerful means of influencing people than any previously known. It was this threat, and all its implications, that resulted in the strong movement for greater forms of political or formal control of the various media's content and activities. Such fears were understandable, for there were no established social or cultural control mechanisms which could deal with these new phenomena that for the first time allowed the dissemination from a centralized source of messages to large groups of people (or "audiences") across vast distances, with a sense of immediate impact.

There was also a deep concern about the possible detrimental

influences which these new forms of communications/entertainment would have in lowering the overall standards of culture set by the intellectual elite. The controversy surrounding high culture and low culture and the suspected role of the mass media in the dilution of cultural standards has a long and incomplete history.[20] In a society pervaded by mass communications there is a strong tendency toward a semblance of uniformity, because the population generally receives the majority of its messages from a relatively small number of authoritative sources. This uniformity differs from the cultural consensus previously obtained from the traditional internalized values and attitudes, because it depends on a sustained flow of information and is therefore in some sense unstable. It is however precisely this unstable quality which allows modern societies to undergo the rapid social and economic changes required of them. In this manner the media of mass communications can in fact have a positive integrative role in a period of differentiation and fragmentation of relationships.[21]

The question remains to be answered as to how these various new media forms were adopted and integrated into American society, and why some of them experienced so much difficulty in the process. We have already noted the "acceptance by use" concept utilized by institutions, but total social and cultural acceptance required a greater measure of accommodation by both the medium and its audience. Thus as each of the mass media spread throughout the country, certain definite adjustments had to be made to ensure that these technological innovations and their content would

conform, as far as possible, to the existing local system of values and social norms. These adjustments were not easy, for the wide dissemination of a single set of values by the mass media could not possibly satisfy all segments of a highly pluralistic society, and localized values thus came into conflict with the national content of the media.

Particularly in the case of motion pictures and later radio, the problems raised by the economic requirement to provide a large and therefore national audience base were almost insurmountable. As Wilbur Schramm has suggested, the wide dissemination of such content raised questions, "which were never very important in the relatively restricted arts of theater, circus, and vaudeville, or the relatively indigenous folk art."[22] The introduction of television has of course, extended the boundaries of this problem beyond all hope of settlement.[23]

The question of centralization and size became important. Within a very few years of their introduction motion pictures, radio and television, and to a lesser extent newspapers, grew to become large business organizations as well as great agencies of communications. How could these centralized institutions continue to be representative of, and sensitive to, local interests and values especially as the intense competition of the marketplace quickly reduced their numbers? This question was partly answered by the Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947, when the commissioneers stated: "If modern society requires great agencies of mass communication, if these concentrations become so powerful that they are a threat to democracy, if democracy cannot solve the

problem simply by breaking them up - then those agencies must control themselves or be controlled by government."[24] It is a fact, nevertheless, that except for certain specific actions taken by the Federal Communications Commission with regards to radio and television, the major mass media have never been made accountable for "representativeness" toward their audiences.

Finally, the arrival and growing influence of the mass media caused American recreational interest to divide into two distinct layers of participation. On the bottom was the continued local participation in all forms of recreational opportunities, including sports, excursions and even urban commercial amusements such as penny-arcades, burlesque, ethnic theater and the male specialties of the saloon and billiard parlour. All of these were organized within the control of the local community, and as such were subject to local tastes and preferences.

The top layer in this schema consisted of the vast, vicarious participation in national sports, news and recreational interests, fostered particularly by the support given to them by the mass media, and consisting of an audience of millions stretching over a wide area. The sources for these activities were more centralized, and therefore beyond the control of any one local group, other than by outright suppression.

Thus while the historical experiences of a society shape its general culture, its principal values, its interests and tastes, and the nature of its political and economic institutions, a society's culture and social structure, in turn, shape its system of mass communication. In America, one of the most important

influences on the development of the mass media has been the trend toward urbanization; the increasing need for new communications forms to facilitate the development of a complex urban existence. Beginning as early as the 1830's, the need for urban communications forms, which allowed the dissemination of information over a wide geographic area within a relatively short time period, became obvious, and was met by the emergence of the urban mass press. Later the growing complexity of urban life encouraged the development of the telegraph, telephone and the motion picture, to be followed in the twentieth century by radio and finally television. While the entire country, rural and urban, benefitted from these developments, they remained essentially the products of an urban society, and except for a few very specialized media forms, their content was largely concerned with urban life, and reflected urban values.

It is because of this strong urban influence, and thus orientation, that it makes a great deal of sense to examine the history of the mass media in the United States as one aspect of the ongoing urbanization process. The use of the urban growth model provides a strong theoretical framework for such an examination, and will contribute to a greater understanding of the role of the mass media in the development of American society.

ENDNOTES

[1]There are several good sources which examine the growth and importance of metropolitan regions: Seymour J. Mandelbaum, Boss Tweed's New York (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965), examines the entire concept of new forms of communication as centralizing forces, concentrating on New York City in the last half of the nineteenth century; Allan R. Pred, The Spatial Dynamics of U.S. Urban-Industrial Growth, 1800-1914 (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), develops theoretical models to describe this process; Beverly Duncan and Stanley Lieberson, Metropolis and Region in Transition (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1970), cover the historical framework and develops economic models; while Ralph Thomlinson, Urban Structure: The Social and Spatial Character of Cities (New York: Random House, 1969), is a broad overview of the ecology of urban life.

[2]The persistence of the agrarian myth in American culture has been discussed in many books and articles, the best of which are Henry Nash Smith, The Virgin Land (New York: Vintage Books, 1950); and Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), which discusses the relationship between technology and the pastoral ideal in America.

[3]The best expositions of the changes in America at this time are found in Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); and Samuel P. Hays, The Response to Industrialism (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1957).

[4]Historical Statistics of the United States (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 1961), Series A 195-209, p. 14.

[5]Allan R. Pred, contains a useful model of the relationship between established centers of commerce and the emergence of industrial complexes, based upon the concept of "initial advantage." See pp. 12-41.

[6]John F. Stover, American Railroads (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 145.

[7]Francis Merrill, Society and Culture (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 310.

[8]Wilbur Schramm, "Communication Development and the Development Process," Lucien Pye, ed., Communications and Political Development (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 34.

[9]Recent Social Trends in the United States, Vol. 1 (New York: The McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1933), pp. xxvi-xxvii. This study included changes in transportation as part of the overall alteration in communications networks.

[10]Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 408.

[11]Recent Social Trends, p. 167.

[12]Anselm Strauss, The American City: A Sourcebook of Urban Imagery (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968), p. 125.

[13]Quoted in Strauss, p. 127.

[14]For a detailed discussion of the problem of the conflict between the development of technology and the agrarian myth see Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden.

[15]The concept of "accommodation" has usually been defined within the context of personal conflict and adaption. However, it can also be seen as a means of coping with social change. For a good description of how societies do adapt to such changes see Robin M. Williams, Jr., American Society (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), Chapter XIV - "The Integration of American Society."

[16]Much of the theory on the nature and functions of the mass media in this study is based upon the outline proposed by Denis McQuail in Towards a Sociology of Mass Communication (London: Collier-MacMillan Limited, 1969). McQuail's theories have been modified to reflect the historical dimension with which this study is concerned. For a summary of the characteristics of the mass media see pp. 11-17.

[17]McQuail, pp. 9-10.

[18]The introduction of the telephone also corroborates this contention. When first made available the new invention was foreseen to have a great future as an entertainment medium. Alexander Graham Bell always included music as well as voice in his demonstrations. The perfection of the radio, of course, destroyed this aspect of telephonic communication. For a fuller description of the use of the telephone as an entertainment medium see Erik Barnouw, A Tower in Babel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 7-9.

[19]McQuail, p. 12.

[20]While there are no answers to this argument, there is a great deal of interesting material on both sides. The best examinations of the whole concept of "mass culture" are found in Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White eds., Mass Culture (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), and Mass Culture Revisited (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971); while the results of a symposium on the subject containing many important viewpoints is Norman Jacobs ed., Culture for the Millions? (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).